



Special report: the 2004 Session

State Representative

Shay Schual-Berke

33rd Legislative District



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Dear Friends and Neighbors,

With a current overall two-year budget of \$23 billion, the Legislature has reduced the size of state government in gross dollars by approximately 25 percent over the last seven years. Finding the necessary cuts this past session was not an easy task, but I want to thank you for the opportunity you have given me to weigh competing needs on your behalf, as I represent you.

It feels like our state is in better overall shape this year compared to one year ago. The economy is starting to rebound, and employers are hiring. We made progress in 2003 on education, health care, job creation, transportation and other important issues. But much work remains to be done, and many of us are feeling the impacts of tightened belts still.

More of you than ever before responded to my pre-session survey; people in our area expect more progress from the Legislature on education funding, tax fairness, health care and other challenges. I'm devoting my time and energy this year to solving problems that people described as priorities for themselves and our state.

This newsletter briefly describes some of the legislation I'm sponsoring as your representative. Although this is only a sample of my sponsorships, please feel free to contact me about these and any other issues you don't see here that you would like me to be working on for you.

As in many past years, I promise to report back to you at the end of the session how I voted on some of the key issues. Staying in touch with you is important to me and helps me do a better job representing you. So remember you can always contact me by phone, hot-line, e-mail or regular mail to share your thoughts or ask my help.

Warmly,

Shay Schual-Berke, M.D.

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“Work on quality education.”

— A.C., Kent WA.

SIMPLE MAJORITY FOR SCHOOLS

In overwhelming numbers, citizens told me education should be the Legislature's top priority. I agree. Other than parents, nothing is more important to helping children succeed in careers and life than good teachers and good schools.

One of the best ways we can help schools is to allow school levies to pass with a simple majority vote like other public initiatives. I have proposed a resolution to the people that would end the depression-era law that requires 60 percent votes to pass school levies. We passed this in the House, and now must persuade the Senate.

Last year, 59 percent of Highline School District voters supported a crucial school levy only to see it fail. A few months later, a second attempt won with 67 percent, but by then some good teachers had already taken jobs elsewhere. For the sake of fairness, and our schools, we should apply the principle of “majority rules” to school levies. (HJR 4204)

SCHOOLS MUST HAVE ENOUGH NURSES

Department of Health and state education guidelines say at least one school nurse is needed for every 1,500 students to treat injuries and emergencies, monitor immunizations, evaluate hearing and vision,

and detect child abuse and other health threats before children suffer irreversible harm. Many school districts fall dangerously short of this standard—some having only one nurse for every 2,500 students!

We must do better. I'm sponsoring legislation that would give school districts until the year 2007 to meet state education and health standards for nurse staffing in public schools. My proposal also creates a state School Nurse Account to help fund additional hiring of school nurses. (HB 2763)



Seattle Christian High School students James Etherington and Kevin French helped me tabulate your responses to my legislative survey.

HEALTHIER SCHOOL FOOD

An epidemic of childhood obesity is putting children at risk of heart disease, diabetes and other diseases. Public school vending machines and food sales help fuel this epidemic by promoting consumption of soda pop and junk foods that are high in fat and salt and low in nutrition.

I'm proposing legislation to replace sale of unhealthy foods at elementary and middle-schools with sale of foods and drinks that are healthy and high in nutritional value. The U.S. Surgeon General and our pediatricians say this is vital to children's health. Importantly, nothing in my legisla-

tion affects foods children bring from home or special events such as school parties. (HB 2760)

KEEP KIDS SAFE!

People in Washington have the option of paying a few dollars more for special license plates that honor and help fund colleges and other worthy causes. I'm proposing a new “Keep Kids Safe!” license plate. In addition to sending an important message, all proceeds from the Keep Kids Safe license plates would be dedicated to our Children's Trust Fund, which is devoted to protecting Washington's children against child abuse and neglect. (HB 2334)

“Please help our hospitals and retirement homes stay accessible. The insurance costs are really cutting into services.”

— Shirley, Burien

ESSENTIAL INSURANCE FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

Group Homes, Adult Family Homes and many other places that care for vulnerable children and adults obviously need insurance, for their protection and the protection of those they care for. But many can no longer get liability insurance at *any* price because insurers have pulled out of the market.

Since individual insurers will not offer needed coverage, I've proposed new insurance pools where insurers

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will join together to provide needed coverage. My proposal would not regulate the price of insurance policies, but would require insurers who do business in Washington to pool their efforts so that homes for at-risk kids and vulnerable adults can remain open. This kind of pool could be expanded to help doctors, hospitals or even those in the construction industry if necessary. (HB 1582, HB 2468)

BANNING GENETIC DISCRIMINATION

Washington is one of only four states that doesn't ban discrimination in employment or insurance based on genetic information. Employers or insurers shouldn't be able to violate patient privacy by obtaining genetic information from health records without permission. Worse yet is discrimination against people who are seen as "bad genetic risks" when no actual health problem is apparent.

Genetic discrimination also harms public health, because fear of discrimination causes many people to avoid genetic tests that may be needed to protect their health and assist research into cures for life-threatening diseases. Groups ranging from the American Cancer Society to the Washington Association of Churches and Jewish Federation agree it's time to ban genetic discrimination in Washington, and I'm proposing that we ban it *now*. (HB 2772)

ETHICAL STEM-CELL RESEARCH

Human stem cell research offers immense promise for developing new medical treatments and potential cures for diabetes, cancer,

Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, heart disease, spinal cord injury, and many other debilitating diseases and injuries. This research could prevent untold human suffering and save billions of dollars.

Tragically, legitimate stem cell research has been hampered by fears about human cloning and other morally unacceptable consequences. To resolve this dilemma, I've authored legislation that requires medical and ethical experts to create specific guidelines for stem cell research. My bill also bans any attempt to clone a human being in Washington State. Thoughtful legislation can promote the enormous benefits of stem cell research while avoiding the risks.



Shay recently met with children from Kent Mountain View Academy.

Important stem cell research is already being done in places like Korea, where they just developed what may be a cure for Parkinson's disease. Improving stem cell research policies will help keep Washington state the frontrunner in biotechnology and promote the good paying jobs this research generates. (HB 2336, HJM 4030)

"Real estate valuation should be frozen when one starts receiving Social Security"

— H.R., Des Moines

SENIOR PROPERTY-TAX RELIEF

A vote of the people created Washington's senior citizen property-tax relief law, and my survey showed that 76 percent of the people still support it. This tax-relief not only exempts seniors from certain levies, depending on income, it also freezes the assessed value of their residence.

The problem is that the number of seniors granted property-tax relief has actually *declined* every year since 1996, because the \$30,000 income limit hasn't been adjusted for inflation. I'm sponsoring legislation to raise the limit to \$35,000, which will get needed tax relief to an additional 17,000 retirees. (HB 2436)

MENTAL HEALTH PARITY

To reduce out-of-pocket health care costs for thousands of state residents, I've proposed a health care reform that will add needed mental health services to major insurance plans. At least one in five persons will experience some form of mental illness during their lives. Fortunately, timely treatment can help children and others experiencing mental illness to recover, be productive and enjoy a good quality of life.

My proposal requires health insurance plans to provide the same level of coverage for mental health services

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as is provided for medical and surgical services. States and private companies that have mental health parity in insurance find it actually saves money by reducing absenteeism, improving productivity and stopping problems before they ruin lives.
(HB 1828)

PHYSICIAN AND HEALTH PROFESSIONAL DISCIPLINE

It should go without saying that we expect doctors and other health care professionals to meet the highest standards of professionalism and discipline. In fact, however, Washington's 57 health professions are regulated by 14 separate boards and the Secretary of the Department of Health. There is no uniformity in standards of discipline, and they have too often proved ineffective.

We must move forward with effective reform of our disciplinary system, so medical errors are reduced, the ability of good doctors to practice good medicine is strengthened, and those not providing good enough care are identified and dealt with. My bill will create a state task force to thoroughly review Washington's standards of conduct and discipline for *all* health professionals, and recommend specific improvements without delay.
(HB 2834)

"We need to have drug prices reduced – make them like Canada."

— D.B., Des Moines

AFFORDABLE MEDICINES FROM CANADA

By a nearly 4 to 1 margin, those who answered my survey said Washington should save taxpayer money by buying medicines from Canada. I heard you! I am sponsoring legislation that authorizes state agencies to buy prescription drugs from Canada, if they are of equal quality and more affordable than the medicines purchased from domestic drug manufacturers.

In many cases, the exact same medicines can be bought from pharmacies and drug-manufacturers in Canada at half or a third of the price charged by American companies.

Passing this reform will mean taking issue with a policy of the federal government, as other states are doing. But affordable medicines can save lives – and my bet is that when America's giant pharmaceutical companies are faced with real competition, they'll reduce prices, too.
(HB 2469)

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